



EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES

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Ambassador James C. Oberwetter
Remarks as Given for the Opening Reception
Of the Exhibit "The Middle East Through American Eyes:
The Photography of Tom Abercrombie
February 24, 2007
National Museum, 8:30pm

Esteemed Minister Madani, excellencies, honored guests, Mrs. Abercrombie, Mr. Kerr, ladies and gentlemen, good evening to you all. It is a pleasure to welcome you to the opening of the exhibition "The Middle East Through American Eyes: The Photography of Tom Abercrombie."

As you tour the exhibition and assimilate these beautiful and timeless photographs, you will journey within two stories. One, as the title explains, is the story of an artist traveling with camera and film, creatively capturing and reflecting the people and lands that he loved. That artist is Tom Abercrombie. The majority of these photographs are of the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia in particular. Tom traversed Saudi Arabia. He was drawn to it, and held it dear, dear to his heart.

The other journey is a journey of cooperation – cooperation between our two governments, between the private sector and the private sector, and among all of our people – so that all of us have the opportunity to see and to enjoy the work of a world-class photographer, Tom Abercrombie.

I first came to know of Tom's work over 20 years ago when I collaborated with the Abercrombies, working on a project in Yemen with his wife Lynn, who is an accomplished photographer in her own right. At that time, Tom was one of the most successful photo-journalists at one of the most popular magazines in the world, working for one of the most popular magazines in the world, National Geographic.

Tom was person of incredible versatility, whose life's journey was more successful and full of adventure than most of us could ever dream about. When Tom passed away last year, National Geographic published a moving tribute to his works last August, using a selection of photographs – many of these photographs instantly recognizable -- to celebrate his accomplishments.

The importance of Saudi Arabia to Tom Abercrombie was one of the highlights of the National Geographic tribute. At the Embassy, we thought it would be wonderful to bring his work wider attention here in Saudi Arabia. And that is where the trip on the road to cooperation begins.

First, we approached National Geographic magazine. The magazine was thrilled with the idea of putting together an exhibition of Tom's work. We also thought there would be people at National Geographic who could add a wider dimension and greater understanding to Tom's work and would be able to attend. And that's why tonight Tom's widow Lynn is here and Tom's close friend and colleague Bill Marr.



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After we had the support of National Geographic, we went to the Ministry of Information and Culture to show precisely how Tom had brought Saudis and Americans together through his photographs and articles. In fact, for most Americans of a certain age, Tom's photographs gave

them their first view of Saudi Arabia, and the people and the land of the Middle East. And the Ministry wholeheartedly agreed to host this exhibit.

National Geographic enthusiastically helped us by beautifully producing and mounting these photographs in Tom's own studio. And so this cooperation has given the people of Saudi Arabia a wonderful exhibition that, after it leaves the National Museum here in Riyadh, will later move to various cities throughout the Kingdom.

We are especially pleased to note that the photographs will stay in Saudi Arabia, where they will be enjoyed by Saudis for many years to come. They are a perfect symbol of the ties between our two nations and between our two peoples. And they also underscore how art can bridge cultures by highlighting the beauty of our differences, and the common humanity that we share.

I invite you to enjoy the exhibition tonight. We hope you will return for other visits with your friends and your families. We thank you for being here this evening, and for your expression of support for this exhibition. Shukran jazilan.